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SPEECH BETTERMENT IN ALABAMA¹

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Fortune was with us last April when we were given the responsibility of conducting the Speech Movement in Alabama, for our zeal for the English cause prevented our pausing to measure the situation before us, and to realize the embryonic condition of the movement. Little did we consider that we were to touch for speech purposes a state of over 51,000 square miles and a population of about 2,000,000. Little did we realize that we had to discover the situation locally and fashion our own tools. For a long time we were in the predicament of an old negro who, upon joining the Do-Right church, could explain its tenets only by his oft-repeated "Why, jes do right."

First, after studying the speech situation nationally, we considered it locally. We found that the most embarrassing deficiency, even among many of our cultured people, is a tendency toward slovenliness of speech. I might say in passing that, while much of this is due to mere public tolerance, much is also due to the influence of negro dialect, to the imitation of the negro just for fun, and to the children's imitation of the nurse's speech. Only a few days ago as I entered my boarding-place, I heard the little boy exclaim to the negro "mammy," "I *sot* the baby down myself." Further, we found poor enunciation generally evident. For instance, we teachers have had to waste much of our class time either in having students repeat their answers or in repeating the answers ourselves for the benefit of the classes. Another difficulty is voice placement. While the voices are generally soft, quite often they are pitched in such a way as to produce tenseness or hoarseness after steady use; and, moreover, they often lack volume and depth.

¹A paper read before the Public Speaking Section of the National Council of Teachers of English, New York, December 1, 1916.

With this situation before us, we decided upon first conducting a vigorous publicity campaign and then formulating plans for instruction to meet the demand that we were sure would follow the campaign. We have tried to keep in mind two purposes especially: to relate the cause to every organized movement and to utilize all popular methods. Furthermore, we have refused to attack a problem without a plan. Fortunately we can easily relate this movement to any cause that comes along, even the Good Roads Movement. For methods, we are greatly indebted to the Better Babies Week, Fashion Week, Health Week, the various parades and open-air festivals that have been given in our country.

Now what has been done? We devoted all of last summer largely to the publicity campaign, first through the press, then through the summer schools and the various public gatherings. Before I solicited, as chairman of the committee, the aid of the press, I summoned all the information I had gleaned from cursory visits to a certain department of journalism and I had suggestions from journalist friends. Armed thus with information as to what constitutes newspaper courtesy, how to write news articles, etc., I visited the editors of the leading papers in the cities and talked over the situation. As a result of this precaution and because of the natural inclination of our papers to espouse a good cause, particularly one of this nature, we have had the heartiest co-operation from the press. Recently the *Birmingham News* devoted all of its weekly education page to the subject of speech betterment. Now the papers are taking up the subject at times independently of us. For instance, when a great singer or actor comes to the city, the reporters of a certain paper secure statements about the value of training for distinct enunciation or pleasantness of voice. Indeed, we cannot supply material fast enough to the leading papers of the state. I should say, furthermore, that the printing-houses have been quite generous, having donated to the cause, for local and national use, five thousand programs and circulars.

The summer-school gatherings and the larger state teachers' institutes have heard the subject discussed. The members of the English Association, one hundred and fifty in number, have helped much in various ways. In several smaller communities of Alabama

their pupils are writing for the local papers about the subject and about their efforts toward personal improvement. The Farmers' Association of Alabama received the speech representative cordially last summer and passed a resolution of indorsement. The Merchants' Association of Alabama will give us a hearing. The ministers, the physicians, the business organizations, the rotary clubs, and other such bodies are yet to hear us. Throughout this campaign we have used, with effect, the most obvious slogan—"Let everyone use the best speech of which he is capable."

Now the campaign thus far has touched strongly the larger town and city population. There yet remains the problem of touching vitally the rural districts. The Farmers' Association's co-operation, the articles in the *Progressive Farmer*, the reaching of the rural teacher, have helped and will help. A most potent agency will be, I am sure, the schools of the state like the Alabama Girls' Technical Institute, the majority of whose students come from the smaller towns and the country. After a recent presentation of our movement, we persuaded our 560 students to write about it to the home people, especially to the teachers. When the *Birmingham News* appeared with an account of our better-speech activities and other such matters, we had our students call the attention of the home people to this issue and in many cases send the copies home. For reaching the country districts we are enlisting the interest of government agents at work among us—agriculture and home-economics demonstrators. A great possibility of reaching the country people, I think, lies in our touching the "all-day singing" gatherings. Last summer some of us formulated this plan, which we could not put into effect, but which we hope to carry out next summer. Just before the meeting of the so-called schools for "all-day singing," with the help of the country teachers, our voice teacher and I hope to persuade the singing masters to hold a one-day conference with us. We expect to have the songs used on these occasions read and sung, to show the masters that the congregation can have enjoyment from the words as well as from the notes. If we can weave in, for suggestion, a little of superior music that they can appreciate, we shall do so. Then we shall have an account of the conference written and sent to all

the English leaders who may be interested in doing likewise. We hope to find a plan for utilizing for our purposes the popular protracted meetings of the country people.

So much for the publicity campaign. There is much of organized effort on foot already. Recently, with the aid of Mr. John M. Clapp, secretary of the American Speech League, we gained the hearty indorsement of the Alabama Federation of Women's Clubs. That body of over six thousand women, one of the most potent agencies in Alabama, will have a committee actively at work for promoting the cause. They will follow, so far as they can, Mr. Clapp's suggestions: that they make it fashionable for young people to speak correctly, distinctly, pleasantly; that they insist that teachers be selected with particular reference to habits of speech; that they urge the adoption of definite requirements in oral English for the elementary schools; that they undertake surveys with reference to speech conditions in Alabama. In the survey work the Alabama chapters of the Southern Association of College Women will probably be quite active. For keeping alive in a general way this subject among the clubs, we have had printed for distribution six programs, planned by Miss Ursula Delchamps of Mobile, which bear upon pronunciation, enunciation and articulation, slang, and sectional differences of speech. The committee will request the clubs to adopt one or more of these programs during the year, or parts of programs as they appeal. Further suggestions relating to personal corrections, etc., will be formulated and will be presented by the committees. For the unification of the speech work, we have organized local committees. For instance, Mrs. Conrad Ohme of Birmingham has general charge of the situation in her district. She has a worker among the clubs, subject to the federation committee, workers in the elementary and high schools respectively, one for the colleges, and one for the Ministers' Conference. She herself has charge of the business district.

The problem of the business district we are attacking in the following ways: There are classes for oral English in the Y.M.C.A.'s and the Y.W.C.A.'s. A conversation class is forming at the Birmingham W.C.T.U. headquarters. Mrs. Ohme has interested one leading merchant of Birmingham to the extent of his promising to

instal a teacher to give a professional course in which oral and written English will be stressed. If we can demonstrate the practical value of such instruction in one case, we shall consider this problem for the most part solved. We are co-operating to the utmost with the Drama League in its proposed organization of dramatic clubs within the larger stores of Birmingham. Our committee of that city hopes to have a pageant this spring which will represent chiefly the speech activities of the business districts.

Our plans for the schools are the Speech Council plan, suggested by Dr. Edwards of Howard College, and the Better Speech Week plan, both of which I have described in the *English Journal*. We find that we can use the Council plan in all grades except the lowest. Here we use speech games, and we have certain weeks observed here and there when corrections made by the children themselves are reported and are recorded, with due commendation at the close of each such week of the child making the most corrections. In our school, the Alabama Girls' Technical Institute, when we observed our Better Speech Week, we enlarged upon the idea of last year by making our activity a community affair, and by introducing dramatic performances of a more impressive and positive character than those of last year. The Boy Scouts, for instance, arrived in Bad English Town just in time to rescue Mrs. Put, who had to be identified as Mrs. Put rather than Mrs. Putt in order to receive her mail and to cash a check. The Camp Fire Girls, with elaborate ceremony, burned their own mistakes. Mr. "Ain't" appeared in town and was chased out by the children. The Information Bureau, presumably at the beginning of school, in the face of Poor English, had to seek the aid of an interpreter. The children of Bad English, named "Can't hardly," etc., upon hearing the names of Good English—"Can hardly," etc.—revolted and had themselves renamed by Good English. One afternoon was devoted to dramatic representations of proverbs and familiar expressions. Another afternoon was devoted to speech games played by the younger children of the public school. Our posters were more varied and impressive than those of last year. One representing the "Beauty and Purity of Speech" marked the beginning of the week. The railroad sign, "Stop, Think, and Speak," helped.

Such posters as comic representations of "Fixing Mary's Hair" and the German proverb, "The ass sings badly because he pitches his voice too high," laughed out of countenance some obstinate difficulties of ours.

At the close of the week, we had a speech parade, the order being thus: Mr. Good English, with banner; a group of French children with a banner reading, "The French children speak their language best"; clowns with posters mounted; Camp Fire Girls with a banner; fools with comic posters; Webster's Unabridged Dictionary with such words as *suspicioned*, *complected*, seeking entrance in vain; Boy Scouts with Bad English in shackles; a group of girls representing by costume the chief sources of our language; a group of twenty girls, in white, with two banners—"He who can express himself may command what he wants" and "A graceful speaker is the universal object of envy." After the parade we had enacted in the town square a scene, written by our dramatic club, representing the promotion of Good English in a country store—Provincialism & Co.—over Barbarism, Slang, etc. We were fortunate in having Mr. John M. Clapp close the exercise with remarks upon the movement and later, with a lecture upon "Talking—the Art of Social Life."

Needless to say, we have advanced another round in our school toward enlisting the students' co-operation for personal improvement. We are told that our week's activities have been far-reaching in effect among town and country people. Our plan for the schools is by no means complete. We expect to use all existing school organizations to the utmost—the story-tellers' leagues, the dramatic clubs, etc. The schools in some instances are furnishing attractive additions to our plan. For instance, Central High School of Birmingham will conduct a military campaign for the cause of good English.

Our next problem concerns that of instruction. We expect to have soon from the National Committee a list of reliable summer-school courses in other states which we can recommend to our teachers. We hope to place, as we can do so, courses in oral English in all of our teacher-training schools, experiments for which some of us have under way. We shall conduct a survey to find

out exactly what is being done in oral English in the schools of the state. This we shall follow with a statement of what is done by the most progressive centers of the country and with definite suggestions for our schools. We shall advocate, as soon as we deem it wise, the state adoption of certain requirements in oral English for the elementary and high schools.

Throughout our agitation not once have we encountered anything except interest. With us, it seems now only a matter of time until Alabama does her part toward making American speech truly pure and beautiful.